New College of Florida
Website Redesign

Content Strategy:
Introduction and Best Practices

This document introduces the discipline of content strategy and outlines best practices for creating web content.

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1. What is content strategy?

1.1 Definition

Content strategy is an integrated set of choices that will determine how and why you create, deliver, and govern content on your site to meet your organizational goals while delivering on your user needs.

1.2 Why is it important?

If you are going to communicate online, you'll need a goal and a plan—otherwise, your content will drown in the noise and abundance of content on the web. Since your content is the first thing your users see when they arrive on the site, it should not be the last thing on your mind.

Content strategy provides the framework to create this plan and helps to:

- Communicate the right messages to the right users at the right time
- Build credibility and trust through consistency and accuracy
- Strengthen your brand
- Keep writers on track with purpose and message
- Keep your site in order

When developing content, look to answer the following questions:

- What does our content need to accomplish for the college, programs, and services we provide?

- What content will we create? How will this content add value to our prospects and students?
- What will your organization need to do to support the content effort?
- How will we know that we are successful?
- How will we maintain the site content moving forward?

Recommended reading

- [Content Strategy for the Web](#)
- [Elements of Content Strategy](#)
- [Content Everywhere](#)
- [Content Strategy at Work](#)

2. Writing for the web

On the web, content is king. A beautiful design will help you stand out, but the design is only as good as the writing and creative assets it contains. Writing for the web best practices encompass the general standards of good writing as well as guidance on information design specific to the web to ensure usability and readability.

2.1 Why is good web writing important?

People come to your site for content—information that can answer their question, help them to complete a certain task, or provide an engaging exploration. This information must be:

- Easy to find

- Easy to understand
- Accurate
- Timely and up to date
- Credible

Think of on-site content as a conversation you are having with your site visitor. Online conversations are different, because:

- At first we don't read pages, we scan them.
- We skim and scan through information to find the content that satisfies our objectives—information overload is real and we tend to cut through the noise.
- We do read when we find what we came for.

2.2 What makes good web content?

General principles

The quality of digital content encompass the following attributes:

- **Appropriate:** right for the user and your organization
- **User-centered:** based on data-driven research and understanding user needs. Writing for the web is almost a misnomer—we're really writing for people.
- **Concise:** straight to the point
- **Useful:** meets users' needs and is actionable
- **Real and Usable**: easy to understand and accessible

- **Consistent:** each piece of content is adhering to the same guidelines
- **Supported:** created and maintained using sustainable processes

Lead with the good stuff

In a digital world full of distractions, people engage with your website in the midst of other tasks and are deeply impatient to find what they're looking for. It's vital for each piece of content to convey its purpose quickly, emphasize user needs, and to allow for users to scan through it quickly.

After a very brief introduction to give contex for what the purpose and substance of the page ist, a page should dive right into what a user is looking for. If political pressures demand a specific piece of content on a certain page, it should never push more interesting or relevant content further down.

Understand what people need to do on each page

A large part of shaping content strategy is understanding what your user is trying to do. There are usually three types of people who will be visiting your site—explorers, information seekers, and doers.

Explorers

Explorers are the people who come to the website not knowing exactly what they are looking for. Some users are explorers who want to discover as much about you as possible. The goal of pages oriented toward

explorers is to make their journeys as enjoyable and fruitful as possible. Content designed for explorers is meant to encourage discovery. These kinds of content should be used strategically throughout the site to promote organic, non-linear explorations throughout the site.

Information seekers

Information seekers come to the website to find answers to specific questions. Page content for these users should be focused and as helpful as possible. Users will always look to the main content on any given page for actionable and relevant information. Short, directed paragraphs, sensible and straightforward headings, lists, and useful links will help them find what they're looking for.

Doers

Doers come to the website to accomplish a task. They may want to begin an online application, donate money, or find a specific document. Rather than exploring or absorbing content, their goal is to be efficient. Content for doers should be focused and direct, with a careful eye toward reducing distraction. Page titles and callouts should be clear and easy to understand. Forms should be laid out in a manner that is easy to scan and fill out. When facilitating an action, don't put obstacles in the way and avoid offering any enticement to leave the page, except by completing the action.

Have a Conversation with Your Users

Writing conversationally is not "dumbing down". Writing conversationally in a plain language with short sentences and short words is communicating clearly. It's about respecting your users' time. Write in a way that busy people understand what you are saying the first time they read it.

- Talk to your site visitors, use "you" (allows for a personal touch and gender neutrality).
- Converse directly even for the serious messages, such as legal. In fact, the more complex the topic is, the more important the clarity of the language would be.
- Use plain language: it helps both low-literacy and high-literacy users.
- Avoid archaic legal language.
- Avoid the company and technical jargon—use your site visitors' words.
- Tips for gender-neutral writing:
  - Use "you"
  - Use the plural noun form
  - Turn a noun phrase into a verb phrase
  - Use an article ("a", "an", "the") instead of a pronoun

Get to the point and encourage action

- Write in the active voice most of the time.
- Write in short, simple sentences—try to keep them to about 10-20 words.

- Use imperative in instructions—start sentences with short, plain, imperative verbs.
- Cut the unnecessary words and keep paragraphs short.
- Start each paragraph with a topic sentence to provide context.
- Put actions in the verbs. Identify the nouns, within which the verbs are buried, bring them out and then simplify.
- Write meaningful links, not just Click here, Learn more, More. For actions, start with verbs. Say what is More about.
- Include calls to action (verb phrases) to respond to conversations primary users want to have with your site.
- Include a short, helpful description to the links and small, clear, relevant images to help users decide as to which link to choose.

Break up content into digestible chunks

- Format your text in a way that supports scanning—site visitors hunt first and don't want to read while hunting.
- Break information into small pieces with small paragraphs, short sentences, lists, and tables. Large blocks of text do not work on the web. Break these walls down into short paragraphs or lists and give each section its own heading (think Q&A format).
- Less is more—give people only what they need to know. Find a clear distinction between what is important to you versus your site visitors. Cut down to essential messages and focus on the facts and user needs.

- Progressive disclosure—start with the key message and layer information. Usability testing proves the "F" pattern for reading—use the inverted pyramid style for your writing. Start with a headline, then provide key message or summary, and only then cover the details.
- Think pull not push for marketing content.
- People tend to choose the first option—order options in order of priority.

Observe proper header hierarchy

Headers provide a visual hierarchy for your readers that makes your content more scannable and usable, while also gives search engines clues about the supplementary content of the page. Proper header usage also helps accessibility, as they are used by screen readers to announce the text in a logically nested way.

There are several levels of header tags and they should always be used in the proper order. The rules are:

- Don't use a higher number header before a lower number; no skipping rank.
- Try not to orphan headers—if you only have one instance of an H4, consider whether that content is really so much different to warrant another level, or if it belongs as part of its H3 parent.

H1 header guidelines

H1 headers have an important job—they must convey context to:

- Engage the users for whom it leads to useful content.
- Signal that it's not the right choice to users who are looking for something else.
- Signal to search engines what the content that follows is about.

In HTML4, standard page markup was to only have a single H1 which typically served as the title of the page. Consequently, search engines and SEOs adopted a rule of only using one H1 per page.

HTML5 has evolved other ways to convey to search engines the content of their pages and page titles. Search engines adopted more nuanced approaches to understanding a page's relevance. The first H1 on the page is the most important, and Fastspot structures these already as part of front end development. Pages with multiple H1s will pass validators, as long as the headline hierarchy is respected.

Consider the following best practices when writing H1s:
- Make sure that each page has at least one H1 header.
- Be clear, make sure the headline clearly connects to the content.
- Strive for a medium length (about 8 words).
- Combine nouns with a call to action or other clarifying phrase, use colon or dash and subtitle when appropriate. Nouns alone work well for topics or labels.

- If a headline alone is not enough to provide clarity, offer a brief description that is short, personal, includes calls to action, and provides connections to what users may want.
- Do not use abbreviations or acronyms as outside users won't understand these.
- Avoid idioms specific to certain regions - the web is a global audience.

Writing compelling, well-structured headers

Use headers to divide your content into manageable pieces. Well-written headers in a well-organized format help users to quickly scan and find the section they need, follow the flow of the story better.

- **Be creative.** A good title can make the difference between a story or a feature area receiving tons of traffic or hardly any clicks at all. Choose your titles carefully. Be sure that your titles are exemplary of your voice & tone.
- **Be loose.** Remember that you are not a newspaper. You should always be factual, but you can have more fun and personality than *The New York Times*. The goal of a title is to entice your users to want to read more. Dry or boring titles will not garner the same response as something that is intelligent and unexpected.
- **Be engaging.** Why should the reader keep reading? Focus on the details that are the most intriguing or interesting. Include keywords in the headers, as this is good both for your readers and for search

engines. Headings should be as concise as possible, but a longer, clearer title is much better than short, vague or cutesy one.

- **Be clear.** Make sure that all navigation titles take advantage of keywords whenever possible and are written in clear language that does not rely on insider terms.

Consider the following information design best practices when it comes to headers:

- Use questions, statements, and verb phrases.
- Writing action headers and action links can be accomplished by using gerunds ("-ing" form of the verb) and imperatives ("do this" form of the verb).
- Use nouns and noun phrases sparingly.
- Write from the user point of view. Use "I" for the user in the question, "you" for the user in the answer, "we" for the organization.
- Be consistent (parallel) in the style you use within the same level of headings to help the user scan the text by forming a pattern.
- Use only the number of heading levels you need—don't go too deep with the hierarchy. A good rule is that you should have multiple equally important sub-sections to warrant another level of heading.
- Don't center headlines or headings—users may either miss the heading if they are scanning down the left margin of content or find it hard to go back to the left margin of the text once they focused on the centered header.

Use lists

Ordered/numbered and unordered/bulleted lists help break up large blocks of text into a more scannable format. A good rule to determine if you need to create a list from longer-form paragraph text is if you have a number of items in a sentence separated by commas.

> For example:
>> *"We offer undergraduate, graduate, doctoral, and certificate programs"*
>
> changes to:
>> *"We offer the following programs:*
>> - *Undergraduate*
>> - *Graduate*
>> - *Doctoral*
>> - *Certificate*

- Use bulleted lists for items and options.
- Use numbered lists for instructions implying a sequence.
- Keep most lists short. If the list is long, group the items so you can make several shorter lists, each with its own heading.
- Start the list items in the same sentence structure to maintain the pattern.

- Don't use lists in the body of the page as a substitute for site navigation.

Leverage quality media

Photography and video are some of the most important and compelling pieces of content for your website, so use care when selecting which will tell your story. Use big, beautiful images in large feature areas, and if you must use smaller, non-professionally shot images do so sparingly and in subpage content and smaller callouts.

Recommended reading

[Letting Go of the Words](#)

[Don't Make Me Think](#)

3. Search engine optimization

Search engine optimization (SEO) may feel overwhelming and complicated. But the good news is that if you're following good web writing practices, you're probably well on your way to having great SEO.

Not only does having good content make your users happy, but it also lets search engines know that your site provides the answers and content for which your potential users are looking. This results in happier humans and happier robots, all of which lead to better search results and rankings for you.

3.1 What is SEO?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of creating a website or web page to have markup and content quality that is optimized for search engines. Good SEO practices help increase a site's page ranking and search engine visibility. As a marketing strategy, SEO can provide better placement within the search results, thus providing higher levels of exposure to outside audiences of users seeking related content—without the use of paid advertising.

With time, search engines' algorithms evolved to focus on the end user, ensuring that they deliver value by matching user search intent in the best possible way. Consequently, the best way towards good SEO practices is creating content that meets user needs; the search engines will follow. Focus on the following:

1. Create good, well-structured content.
2. Link it to other content so users can find what they're looking for.
3. Update it regularly so that search engines know it is fresh.

3.2 SEO best practices

Think of Google as a real person

Site visitors are unlikely to read whole pages of text unless they know that the content pertains to exactly what they are looking for. Use clear, descriptive, and keyword-rich text for page titles.

Use keywords wisely

Include primary keywords in the page title (H1) and keyword-rich phrases in the copy at least twice. Use secondary keywords in page headlines and content where appropriate. Try not to think of keywords as things you have to force into your content. They should be a natural expression of what you are trying to convey, and what your visitors will naturally be searching for.

The next most important item is the first paragraph

After the page title, the introductory paragraph in an HTML <p> tag provides further context to Google about what the page is about. Use this paragraph to summarize the contents of the page with relevant and useful keywords.

Check your SERPS

Search engine results page snippets (SERPS) are the pieces of rich content that are rendered to search engines to help a search user determine if the page is relevant to their search. Search engines will use page titles and meta descriptions where provided to fill out this content. Write distinct meta descriptions for each page of your website, but know that in the absence of that metadata, the search engine will make its best guess from the first paragraph of the page.

Use alt text for images

Search engine spiders and people using screen readers cannot see what is being shown in images. Based on the World Wide Web Consortium

(W3C) standards, each image is required to have alternative text, or "alt text." Use the "alt text" to clearly describe the image contents.

Best practice is to provide alt text for every image, but one exception allows for leaving it blank—if the surrounding text does a sufficient job conveying the information that the image contains or if image is purely atmospheric in nature, alt text isn't necessary. Additionally, ensure that the alt text attribute is not redundant when read within the context of surrounding copy.

Use naming conventions for image and document files

Images are a very rich form of content. Because of this, naming conventions for image files themselves, along with the alt attribute text, should be well thought-out to lend clarity and context. Consistency is key—a standard file naming convention across all images and documents will ensure that individual files on a website full of hundreds or even thousands are easily located.

Bad examples: imaGE_7890.jpg, aakk7654.jpg, stockICON399.png
Good examples: john-doe-profile.jpg, campus-dining.jpg, university-logo.png.

Use proper URL structure and nomenclature

The structure and composition of a URL, also known as a page's "web address," is of equal importance to the quality of content on a page when

it comes to usability and SEO value. With that in mind, we recommend the following best practices when constructing new page URLs:

Start with the page title

No need to reinvent the wheel! In most cases, your page title will serve as a great start for a well-made URL.

Make it unique

Your website should eliminate duplicate page content as much as possible. If you have two similar pages, consider eliminating one. If you have similar page titles for different content, consider revising the page title to capture the page's distinct content. Unique URLs rank more highly than duplicates - search engines essentially view each duplicate page as less important and authoritative than a single source.

Make it readable

A user should be able to identify the content and context of a page by glancing at a URL. If a human can read it, then likely so can Google which will benefit organic search results.

Short is sweet

Shorter URLs are easier to read and share. Consider this when creating your initial information architecture and when adding new pages. A good rule of thumb is creating URLs that are 50 to 100 characters max. If you plan to use URLs in your print or email communications, shorter ones give

you more flexibility for placement and also look cleaner, more polished and professional.

Drop stop words

Eliminating stop words like "and", "or", "but" can help shorten your URL and improve readability.

Exclude special characters and punctuation

URLs can do funny stuff when they include special characters, spaces, and punctuation. Avoid rendering issues by eliminating them from your URLs.

Avoid capitalization

The way a server interprets capitalization can vary. Some servers types ignore capital letters in subfolders and others see them as distinct and different from lowercase letters. Stick with lowercase letters for everything to avoid potential issues with duplicate content.

Separate words

Word separation is an important baseline for SEO. Use hyphens so words in URLs can be easily read by humans and search engines. This is particularly important when it comes to keywords as the hyphen adds contextual detail for a more accurate search result.

Include SEO keywords

Words in your URL also factor in organic search results. Use of keywords in your page URL will help make your content easier to find.

4. Accessible content

4.1 What is web accessibility?

According to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), web accessibility ensures that people with disabilities can use the web: "web accessibility means that people with disabilities can perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the web, and that they can contribute to the web."

Web accessibility assessment must encompass visual, auditory, physical, speech, cognitive, and neurological disabilities.

Why is web accessibility important?

Creating an accessible website is just the right thing to do. Everyone should be able to get the full value and utility out of your website regardless of the abilities they have. And making the web more accessible improves it for everyone.

4.2 How do you know if your website is accessible?

Currently, [WCAG 2.0](#) is a stable, referenceable technical standard for web accessibility. It has 12 guidelines that are organized under [4 principles:](#)

[perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust](#). For each guideline, there are testable success criteria, which are the [three levels: A, AA, and AAA](#).

Currently, there is no industry standard tool for testing against WCAG compliance. The same website code may pass a particular compliance criteria on one tool's test and fail another tool's test.

Additionally, Fastspot's work with a number of tools has identified known false positives that get incorrectly flagged by particular testing tools, meaning code that is compliant is sometimes flagged as out of compliance. Fastspot's commitment is that once we're done, the tools we provide create error-free accessible web pages when paired with compliant content.

The reality is that keeping your website compliant is an ongoing process, not a finite project. The act of creating and maintaining an accessible website is one that begins with the very earliest steps in strategic planning and continues long after launch. Your migration of content in the new website will have an impact, as will every piece of content created thereafter.

4.3 Creating accessibility compliant content

Good web writing and SEO practices will play a huge role in making sure you are producing accessible content. It is also important that you create

an internal checklist that can cover common repeatable tasks content creators should keep in mind. The list below is a great place to start.

- Transcribing video content.
- Writing descriptive titles, captions, calls to action, and alt tags for images.
  Images and media not only create a more engaging experience for your visitors, but they also contribute to the content being more useful and valuable. Use clear and descriptive alt tags, file names, and captions (when appropriate).
- Using the H tags for headlines and ensuring they are properly ordered. These are important for sighted users as well as people who use assistive technologies. A screen reader can recognize the code and announce the text as a heading with its level, beep or provide some other auditory indicator. Screen readers are also able to navigate heading markup which can be an effective way for screen reader users to more quickly find the content of interest.
- Avoiding acronyms.

4.4 Letting people know accessibility is important to you

Because there is no industry standard for testing compliance, whether or not a website is compliant can be subjective. One of the most impactful things you can do is demonstrate an ongoing good-faith effort related to maintaining accessibility. Fastspot recommends having a dedicated page

in the footer of your site to talk about your accessibility commitment and initiatives.

Accessibility page text

Your accessibility page should be specific to you and your resources and should emphasize your commitment to equal access and fixing issues for people with disabilities. Fastspot recommends using the following language as a starting point while adding in the specific resources and methodologies your organization uses.

> We welcome students, faculty, staff, and visitors with disabilities. We are committed to ensuring an accessible, welcoming working and learning environment for individuals with disabilities, including compliance with federal and state regulations.
>
> *[Write about what ways you try to ensure accessibility for web based content.]*
>
> *[Write about who someone should contact if they have issues with web-based content.]*

If you've published accessibility policies or guidelines, link to those.

Recommended reading

[A Web for Everyone: Designing Accessible User Experiences](#)

5. Content Governance

5.1 Getting everyone on board

A website redesign creates the perfect opportunity to get teams, stakeholders, and partners on the same page with a shared content strategy. Great design doesn't get you far without great content, and aligning and integrating your content creation process with the redesign effort is crucial to project success.

Great content requires planning, shared understanding, and a lot of hard work. Everyone involved in content management for a website should know about web writing best practices, be able to assess the state of existing content, and understand the plan for content at launch and beyond.

While core team members and leadership are usually involved in the discovery phase for the web project, make sure to get buy-in from key stakeholders and teams involved in ongoing content decision making, production, and publishing.

Ways to achieve content buy-in

- **Share the creative brief and vision for the website:** context, objectives, timelines, and desired outcomes.

- **Create brief 1-2 sentence core website content strategy statement:** outlining why we create and publish content online, for whom, and what primary job our content should do for the organization and our audiences. Having a simple, focused mission fosters common understanding and alignment.

- **Conduct stakeholder workshops:** introducing the content strategy framework as well as what is meant by a digital-first mindset and digital content creation best practices.

- **Discuss the migration approach and what will be needed:** by when, why and from whom—whether it's a decision, content contribution, or a workflow change. Content efforts are usually labor-intensive, political, and time-consuming, so make sure to start looping in the right people from the get go.

- **Identify the core content strategy team**: decide on and communicate their roles and responsibilities—for example, the [RACI framework](#) works well for medium-size organizations.

- **Share relevant designs and templates with the group or department**: explain what is changing (visually, structurally) and encourage them to transform their content accordingly moving forward.

- **Communicate project status and updates to the wider team:** so they feel informed and involved, know that they are listened to —content is usually a pain point for many, sometimes they just want to be heard.

Recommended reading

[Managing Chaos: Digital Governance by Design](#)